

Design Review Board - Notes from Discussion 1-19-11

By Celia Kent (Acton 2020)

The Design Review Board's mission is "to promote attractive, pedestrian-friendly development that enhances the Town's character and overall quality of life" (from their web page). They are an advisory Board responsible for reviewing commercial and mixed-use development plans. They are in the process of adding residential development of four or more units to their scope of work as well as municipal building plans.

Key points:

- The law doesn't require zoning and master plan objectives to be in synch, but this master plan process is only worth it if it results in bylaws which support the plan goals. How do we insure that the master plan doesn't become "shelf ware"?
- Zoning bylaws use words which most people don't understand. In order to insure that the zoning reflects what people want, the build-out effects must be illustrated.
- The master plan should address how planning is done in Acton. One agenda item, moving site plan permitting for commercial development from the BoS to the Planning Board, where it is in most Towns, but not Acton, was also discussed. The BoS had this as an agenda item recently. During committee discussion, the term that came up to describe Acton's planning today was "headless"; planning is "balkanized" with many groups weighing in and no clear direction emerging for the town.

Suggestions and Questions for Scenario planning (May public meeting):

- Is there another town with a combination of population density and rural infrastructure (reliance on septic, road system) like Acton? Are there any realistic comparables to illustrate feasible build out scenarios?
- We should try to understand why the South Acton commercial district has failed despite that fact that it does have sewers. It didn't take off even during the building boom. We should discuss how difficult SMART-Growth is to put into practice; Acton's zoning to encourage commercial + residential development in village centers "has so far been less than successful" according to the report prepared by the Rappaport Institute (see von Hoffman "Wrestling with Growth in Acton," 2010). Are we going to keep encouraging what hasn't worked?
- It would be useful to show large maps color-coded and annotated with information about the nature of the activity at each location and highlighting adjacencies, e.g. showing the location of the schools and listing the school population of different ages adjacent to the kinds of existing businesses in Kelly's Corner. It may become clear where adjacent functions can support each other and what adjacencies make less sense.
- DRB can organize their visual preference survey for mixed use, commercial as well as multi-family residential as part of the May public meeting.

- How should we consider the effect of population growth on train travel capacity? (Capacity includes assessing travel to the train station). Acton has a much higher population/travel node ratio than other towns, for instance: both Lincoln and Littleton have one train stop per 8,000 people, Brookline has about 5 stops (subway) per 60,000 or 1/12,000. Acton is 1/22,000. Is there another transportation node on the train line with a similar density?
- The 2020 Committee should highlight where we are at risk for losing our remaining farm land. There are several lots with aging owners. One member of the committee mentioned how worried she is about the farm near Ace Hardware. It is zoned for high density housing (presumably because it is near the train station). But residential neighborhoods interspersed with areas of open farm land like this are what gives her pleasure in living here. She will hate to lose that.

Other Goals and Ideas

- Each new development proposal should illustrate the increase in impervious surfaces which it generates. The effects of new development are cumulative.
- Limit and redesign existing parking
- Put a hold on clear-cutting lots. (e.g. Boxborough law limits cutting down street corridor canopy trees. This regulation has been in place since ~ 2005).
- Concord has imposed a ban on formula businesses (or is in the process of doing so, see <http://sites.google.com/site/preserveourvillagecenters/>)
- Martha's Vineyard has a transfer TAX; eg every real estate transaction has a tax that goes to a fund to purchase open space.